

The Culture of Narcissism: Cultural Dilemmas, Language Confusion and The Formation of Social Identity

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Abstract

The new narcissist is haunted not by guilt but by anxiety. He seeks not to inflict his own certainties on others but to find a meaning in life. Liberated from the superstitions of the past, he doubts even the reality of his own existence. Superficially relaxed and tolerant, he finds little use for dogmas of racial and ethnic purity but at the same time forfeits the security of group loyalties and regards everyone as a rival for the favors conferred by a paternalistic state. His sexual attitudes are permissive rather than puritanical, even though his emancipation from ancient taboos brings him no sexual peace. Fiercely competitive in his demand for approval and acclaim, he distrusts competition because he associates it unconsciously with an unbridled urge to destroy. Hence he repudiates the competitive ideologies that flourished at an earlier stage of capitalist development and distrusts even their limited expression in sports and games. He extols cooperation and teamwork while harboring deeply antisocial impulses. He praises respect for rules and regulations in the secret belief that they do not apply to himself. Acquisitive in the sense that his cravings have no limits, he does not accumulate goods and provisions against the future, in the manner of the acquisitive individualist of nineteenth-century political economy, but demands immediate gratification and lives in a state of restless, perpetually unsatisfied desire.

Keyword: *The Culture of Narcissism; Language; Identity; Social Science;*

Introduction

"A characteristic of our times is the predominance, even in groups traditionally selective, of the mass and the vulgar. Thus, in intellectual life, which of its essence requires and presupposes qualification, one can note the progressive triumph of the pseudo-intellectual, unqualified, unqualifiable..." (Wildavsky, 2018). Can Science be passionate? This question seems to sum up the life of Christopher Lasch, erstwhile a historian of culture later transmogrified into

an ersatz prophet of doom and consolation, a latter day Jeremiah. Judging by his (prolific and eloquent) output, the answer is a resounding no.

There is no single Lasch. This chronicler of culture, did so mainly by chronicling his inner turmoil, conflicting ideas and ideologies, emotional upheavals, and intellectual vicissitudes. In this sense, of (courageous) self-documentation, Mr. Lasch epitomized Narcissism, was the quintessential Narcissist, the better positioned to criticize the phenomenon.

Some "scientific" disciplines (e.g., the history of culture and History in general) are closer to art than to the rigorous (a.k.a. "exact" or "natural" or "physical" sciences). Lasch borrowed heavily from other, more established branches of knowledge without paying tribute to the original, strict meaning of concepts and terms. Such was the use that he made of "Narcissism".

"Narcissism" is a relatively well-defined psychological term. I expound upon it elsewhere ("Malignant self Love - Narcissism Re-Visited"). The Narcissistic Personality Disorder - the acute form of pathological Narcissism - is the name given to a group of 9 symptoms (see: DSM-4). They include: a grandiose Self (illusions of grandeur coupled with an inflated, unrealistic sense of the Self), inability to empathize with the Other, the tendency to exploit and manipulate others, idealization of other people (in cycles of idealization and devaluation), rage attacks and so on. Narcissism, therefore, has a clear clinical definition, etiology and prognosis.

The use that Lasch makes of this word has nothing to do with its usage in psychopathology. True, Lasch did his best to sound "medicinal". He spoke of "(national) malaise" and accused the American society of lack of self-awareness. But choice of words does not a coherence make.

Findings and Discussion

Analytic Summary of Kimball

Lasch was a member, by conviction, of an imaginary "Pure Left". This turned out to be a code for an odd mixture of Marxism, religious fundamentalism, populism, Freudian analysis, conservatism and any other -ism that Lasch happened to come across. Intellectual consistency was not Lasch's strong point, but this is excusable, even commendable in the search for Truth. What is not excusable is the passion and conviction with which Lasch imbued the advocacy of each of these consecutive and mutually exclusive ideas.

"The Culture of Narcissism - American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations" was published in the last year of the unhappy presidency of Jimmy Carter (1979). The latter endorsed the book publicly (in his famous "national malaise" speech).

The main thesis of the book is that the Americans have created a self-absorbed (though not self aware), greedy and frivolous society which depended on consumerism, demographic studies, opinion polls and Government to know and to define itself. What is the solution?

Lasch proposed a "return to basics": self-reliance, the family, nature, the community, and the Protestant work ethic. To those who adhere, he promised an elimination of their feelings of alienation and despair.

The apparent radicalism (the pursuit of social justice and equality) was only that: apparent. The New Left was morally self-indulgent. In an Orwellian manner, liberation became tyranny and transcendence - irresponsibility. The "democratization" of education: "...has neither improved popular understanding of modern society, raised the quality of popular culture, nor reduced the gap between wealth and poverty, which remains as wide as ever. On the other hand, it has contributed to the decline of critical thought and the erosion of intellectual standards, forcing us to consider the possibility that mass education, as conservatives have argued all along, is intrinsically incompatible with the maintenance of educational standards".

Lasch derided capitalism, consumerism and corporate America as much as he loathed the mass media, the government and even the welfare system (intended to deprive its clients of their moral responsibility and indoctrinate them as victims of social circumstance). These always remained the villains. But to this - classically leftist - list he added the New Left. He bundled the two viable alternatives in American life and discarded them both. Anyhow, capitalism's days were numbered, a contradictory system as it was, resting on "imperialism, racism, elitism, and inhuman acts of technological destruction". What was left except God and the Family?

Lasch was deeply anti-capitalist. He rounded up the usual suspects with the prime suspect being multinationals. To him, it wasn't only a question of exploitation of the working masses. Capitalism acted as acid on the social and moral fabrics and made them disintegrate. Lasch adopted, at times, a theological perception of capitalism as an evil, demonic entity. Zeal usually leads to inconsistency of argumentation: Lasch claimed, for instance, that capitalism negated

social and moral traditions while pandering to the lowest common denominator. There is a contradiction here: social mores and traditions are, in many cases, THE lowest common denominator.

Lasch displayed a total lack of understanding of market mechanisms and the history of markets. True, markets start out as mass-oriented and entrepreneurs tend to mass-produce to cater to the needs of the newfound consumers. However, as markets evolve - they fragment. Individual nuances of tastes and preferences tend to transform the mature market from a cohesive, homogenous entity - to a loose coalition of niches. Computer aided design and production, targeted advertising, custom made products, personal services - are all the outcomes of the maturation of markets. It is where capitalism is absent that uniform mass production of goods of shoddy quality takes over. This may have been Lasch's biggest fault: that he persistently and wrong-headedly ignored reality when it did not serve his pet theorizing.

He made up his mind and did not wish to be confused by the facts. The facts are that all the alternatives to the known four models of capitalism (the Anglo-Saxon, the European, the Japanese and the Chinese) have failed miserably and have led to the very consequences that Lasch warned against... in capitalism. It is in the countries of the former Soviet Bloc, that social solidarity has evaporated, that traditions were trampled upon, that religion was brutally suppressed, that pandering to the lowest common denominator was official policy, that poverty - material, intellectual and spiritual - became all pervasive, that people lost all self reliance and communities disintegrated.

There is nothing to excuse Lasch: the Wall fell in 1989. An inexpensive trip would have confronted him with the results of the alternatives to capitalism. That he failed to acknowledge his life-long misconceptions and compile the Lasch errata cum mea culpa is the sign of deep-seated intellectual dishonesty. The man was not interested in the truth. In many respects, he was a propagandist. Worse, he combined an amateurish understanding of the Economic Sciences with the fervor of a fundamentalist preacher to produce an absolutely non-scientific discourse.

Let us analyze what he regarded as the basic weakness of capitalism (in "The True and Only Heaven", 1991): its need to increase capacity and production ad infinitum in order to sustain itself. Such a feature would have been destructive if capitalism were to operate in a closed system. The finiteness of the economic sphere would have brought capitalism to ruin. But the world is NOT a closed economic system. 80,000,000 new consumers are added

annually, markets globalize, trade barriers are falling, international trade is growing three times faster than the world's GDP and still accounts for less than 15% of it, not to mention space exploration which is at its inception.

The horizon is, for all practical purposes, unlimited. The economic system is, therefore, open. Capitalism will never be defeated because it has an infinite number of consumers and markets to colonize. That is not to say that capitalism will not have its crises, even crises of over-capacity. But such crises are a part of the business cycle not of the underlying market mechanism. They are adjustment pains, the noises of growing up - not the last gasps of dying. To claim otherwise is either to deceive or to be spectacularly ignorant not only of economic fundamentals but of what is happening in the world. It is as intellectually rigorous as the "New Paradigm" which says, in effect, that the business cycle and inflation are both dead and buried.

Lasch's argument: capitalism must forever expand if it is to exist (debatable) - hence the idea of "progress", an ideological corollary of the drive to expand - progress transforms people into insatiable consumers (apparently, a term of abuse).

But this is to ignore the fact that people create economic doctrines (and reality, according to Marx) - not the reverse. In other words, the consumers created capitalism to help them maximize their consumption. History is littered with the remains of economic theories, which did not match the psychological makeup of the human race. There is Marxism, for instance. The best theorized, most intellectually rich and well-substantiated theory must be put to the cruel test of public opinion and of the real conditions of existence. Barbarous amounts of force and coercion need to be applied to keep people functioning under contra-human-nature ideologies such as communism.

A horde of what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses must be put to work to preserve the dominion of a religion, ideology, or intellectual theory which do not amply respond to the needs of the individuals that comprise society. The Socialist (more so the Marxist and the malignant version, the Communist) prescriptions were eradicated because they did not correspond to the OBJECTIVE conditions of the world. They were hermetically detached, and existed only in their mythical, contradiction-free realm (to borrow again from Althusser).

Lasch commits the double intellectual crime of disposing of the messenger AND ignoring the message: people are consumers and there is nothing we can do about it but try to present to them as wide an array as possible of goods and services. High brow and low brow have their

place in capitalism because of the preservation of the principle of choice, which Lasch abhors. He presents a false predicament: he who elects progress elects meaninglessness and hopelessness. Is it better - asks Lasch sanctimoniously - to consume and live in these psychological conditions of misery and emptiness? The answer is self evident, according to him. Lasch patronizingly prefers the working class undertones commonly found in the petite bourgeois: "its moral realism, its understanding that everything has its price, its respect for limits, its skepticism about progress... sense of unlimited power conferred by science - the intoxicating prospect of man's conquest of the natural world".

The limits that Lasch is talking about are metaphysical, theological. Man's rebellion against God is in question. This, in Lasch's view, is a punishable offence. Both capitalism and science are pushing the limits, infused with the kind of hubris which the mythological Gods always chose to penalize (remember Prometheus?). What more can be said about a man that postulated that "the secret of happiness lies in renouncing the right to be happy". Some matters are better left to psychiatrists than to philosophers. There is megalomania, too: Lasch cannot grasp how could people continue to attach importance to money and other worldly goods and pursuits after his seminal works were published, denouncing materialism for what it was - a hollow illusion? The conclusion: people are ill informed, egotistical, stupid (because they succumb to the lure of consumerism offered to them by politicians and corporations).

America is in an "age of diminishing expectations" (Lasch's). Happy people are either weak or hypocritical. Lasch envisioned a communitarian society, one where men are self made and the State is gradually made redundant. This is a worthy vision and a vision worthy of some other era. Lasch never woke up to the realities of the late 20th century: mass populations concentrated in sprawling metropolitan areas, market failures in the provision of public goods, the gigantic tasks of introducing literacy and good health to vast swathes of the planet, an ever increasing demand for evermore goods and services. Small, self-help communities are not efficient enough to survive - though the ethical aspect is praiseworthy:

"Democracy works best when men and women do things for themselves, with the help of their friends and neighbors, instead of depending on the state." - "A misplaced compassion degrades both the victims, who are reduced to objects of pity, and their would-be benefactors, who find it easier to pity their fellow citizens than to hold them up to impersonal standards,

attainment of which would entitle them to respect. Unfortunately, such statements do not tell the whole."

No wonder that Lasch has been compared to Mathew Arnold who wrote:

"(culture) does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; ...It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere... the men of culture are the true apostles of equality. The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time."

Culture and Anarchy - a Quite Elitist View

Unfortunately, Lasch, most of the time, was no more original or observant than the average columnist:

"The mounting evidence of widespread inefficiency and corruption, the decline of American productivity, the pursuit of speculative profits at the expense of manufacturing, the deterioration of our country's material infrastructure, the squalid conditions in our crime-ridden cities, the alarming and disgraceful growth of poverty, and the widening disparity between poverty and wealth ... growing contempt for manual labor... growing gulf between wealth and poverty... the growing insularity of the elites... growing impatience with the constraints imposed by long-term responsibilities and commitments."

Paradoxically, Lasch was an elitist. The very person who attacked the "talking classes" (the "symbolic analysts" in Robert Reich's less successful rendition) - freely railed against the "lowest common denominator". True, Lasch tried to reconcile this apparent contradiction by saying that diversity does not entail low standards or selective application of criteria. This, however, tends to undermine his arguments against capitalism. In his typical, anachronistic, language:

"The latest variation on this familiar theme, its reductio ad absurdum, is that a respect for cultural diversity forbids us to impose the standards of privileged groups on the victims of oppression." This leads to "universal incompetence"

and a weakness of the spirit:

"Impersonal virtues like fortitude, workmanship, moral courage, honesty, and respect for adversaries (are rejected by the champions of diversity)... Unless we are prepared to make demands on one another, we can enjoy only the most rudimentary kind of common life... (agreed standards) are absolutely indispensable to a democratic society (because) double standards mean second-class citizenship."

This is almost plagiarism. Allan Bloom ("The Closing of the American Mind"):

"(openness became trivial) ...Openness used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason's power. The unrestrained and thoughtless pursuit of openness ... has rendered openness meaningless."

Lasch: "...moral paralysis of those who value 'openness' above all (democracy is more than) openness and toleration... In the absence of common standards... tolerance becomes indifference."

"Open Mind" becomes: "Empty Mind".

Lasch observed that America has become a culture of excuses (for self and the "disadvantaged"), of protected judicial turf conquered through litigation (a.k.a. "rights"), of neglect of responsibilities. Free speech is restricted by fear of offending potential audiences. We confuse respect (which must be earned) with toleration and appreciation, discriminating judgement with indiscriminate acceptance, and turning the blind eye. Fair and well. Political correctness has indeed degenerated into moral incorrectness and plain numbness.

But why is the proper exercise of democracy dependent upon the devaluation of money and markets? Why is luxury "morally repugnant" and how can this be PROVEN rigorously, formal logically? Lasch does not opine - he informs. What he says has immediate truth-value, is non-debatable, and intolerant. Consider this passage, which came out of the pen of an intellectual tyrant:

"...the difficulty of limiting the influence of wealth suggests that wealth itself needs to be limited... a democratic society cannot allow unlimited accumulation... a moral condemnation of great wealth... backed up with effective political action... at least a rough approximation of economic equality... in the old days (Americans agreed that people should not have) far in excess of their needs."

Lasch failed to realize that democracy and wealth formation are two sides of the SAME coin. That democracy is not likely to spring forth, nor is it likely to survive poverty or total economic equality. The confusion of the two ideas (material equality and political equality) is common: it is the result of centuries of plutocracy (only wealthy people had the right to vote, universal suffrage is very recent). The great achievement of democracy in the 20th century was to separate these two aspects: to combine egalitarian political access with an unequal distribution of wealth. Still, the existence of wealth - no matter how distributed - is a pre-condition. Without it there will never be real democracy. Wealth generates the leisure needed to obtain education and to participate in community matters. Put differently, when one is hungry - one is less prone to read Mr. Lasch, less inclined to think about civil rights, let alone exercise them.

Mr. Lasch is authoritarian and patronizing, even when he is strongly trying to convince us otherwise. The use of the phrase: "far in excess of their needs" rings of destructive envy. Worse, it rings of a dictatorship, a negation of individualism, a restriction of civil liberties, an infringement on human rights, anti-liberalism at its worst. Who is to decide what is wealth, how much of it constitutes excess, how much is "far in excess" and, above all, what are the needs of the person deemed to be in excess? Which state commissariat will do the job? Would Mr. Lasch have volunteered to phrase the guidelines and if so, which criteria would he have applied? Eighty percent (80%) of the population of the world would have considered Mr. Lasch's wealth

to be far in excess of his needs. Mr. Lasch is prone to inaccuracies. Read Alexis de Tocqueville (1835):

"I know of no country where the love of money has taken stronger hold on the affections of men and where a profounder contempt is expressed for the theory of the permanent equality of property... the passions that agitate the Americans most deeply are not their political but their commercial passions... They prefer the good sense which amasses large fortunes to that enterprising genius which frequently dissipates them."

In his book: "The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy" (published posthumously in 1996) Lasch bemoans a divided society, a degraded public discourse, a social and political crisis, that is really a spiritual crisis.

The book's title is modeled after Jose Ortega y Gasset's "Revolt of the Masses" in which he described the forthcoming political domination of the masses as a major cultural catastrophe. The old ruling elites were the storehouses of all that's good, including all civic virtues, he explained. The masses - warned Ortega y Gasset, prophetically - will act directly and even outside the law in what he called a hyperdemocracy. They will impose themselves on the other classes. The masses harbored a feeling of omnipotence: they had unlimited rights, history was on their side (they were "the spoiled child of human history" in his language), they were exempt from submission to superiors because they regarded themselves as the source of all authority. They faced an unlimited horizon of possibilities and they were entitled to everything at any time. Their whims, wishes and desires constituted the new law of the earth.

Lasch just ingeniously reversed the argument. The same characteristics, he said, are to be found in today's elites, "those who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production and thus set the terms of public debate". But they are self appointed, they represent none but themselves. The lower middle classes were much more conservative and stable than their "self appointed spokesmen and would-be liberators". They know the limits and that there are limits, they have sound political instincts:

"...favor limits on abortion, cling to the two-parent family as a source of stability in a turbulent world, resist experiments with

'alternative lifestyles', and harbor deep reservations about affirmative action and other ventures in large- scale social engineering."

And who purports to represent them? The mysterious "elite" which, as we find out, is nothing but a code word for the likes of Lasch. In Lasch's world Armageddon is unleashed between the people and this specific elite. What about the political, military, industrial, business and other elites? Yok. What about conservative intellectuals who support what the middle classes do and "have deep reservations about affirmative action" (to quote him)? Aren't they part of the elite? No answer. So why call it "elite" and not "liberal intellectuals"? A matter of (lack) of integrity.

The members of this fake elite are hypochondriacs, obsessed with death, narcissistic and weaklings. A scientific description based on thorough research, no doubt.

Even if such a horror-movie elite did exist - what would have been its role? Did he suggest an elite-less pluralistic, modern, technology-driven, essentially (for better or for worse) capitalistic democratic society? Others have dealt with this question seriously and sincerely: Arnold, T.S. Elliot ("Notes towards the Definition of Culture"). Reading Lasch is an absolute waste of time when compared to their studies. The man is so devoid of self-awareness (no pun intended) that he calls himself "a stern critic of nostalgia". If there is one word with which it is possible to summarize his life's work it is nostalgia (to a world which never existed: a world of national and local loyalties, almost no materialism, savage nobleness, communal responsibility for the Other). In short, to an Utopia compared to the dystopia that is America. The pursuit of a career and of specialized, narrow, expertise, he called a "cult" and "the antithesis of democracy".

Yet, he was a member of the "elite" which he so chastised and the publication of his tirades enlisted the work of hundreds of careerists and experts. He extolled self-reliance - but ignored the fact that it was often employed in the service of wealth formation and material accumulation. Were there two kinds of self-reliance - one to be condemned because of its results? Was there any human activity devoid of a dimension of wealth creation? Therefore, are all human activities (except those required for survival) to cease?

Lasch identified emerging elites of professionals and managers, a cognitive elite, manipulators of symbols, a threat to "real" democracy. Reich described them as trafficking in

information, manipulating words and numbers for a living. They live in an abstract world in which information and expertise are valuable commodities in an international market. No wonder the privileged classes are more interested in the fate of the global system than in their neighborhood, country, or region. They are estranged, they "remove themselves from common life". They are heavily invested in social mobility. The new meritocracy made professional advancement and the freedom to make money "the overriding goal of social policy". They are fixated on finding opportunities and they democratize competence. This, said Lasch, betrayed the American dream!?:

"The reign of specialized expertise is the antithesis of democracy as it was understood by those who saw this country as 'The last best hope of Earth'."

For Lasch citizenship did not mean equal access to economic competition. It meant a shared participation in a common political dialogue (in a common life). The goal of escaping the "laboring classes" was deplorable. The real aim should be to ground the values and institutions of democracy in the inventiveness, industry, self-reliance and self-respect of workers. The "talking classes" brought the public discourse into decline. Instead of intelligently debating issues, they engaged in ideological battles, dogmatic quarrels, name-calling. The debate grew less public, more esoteric and insular. There are no "third places", civic institutions which "promote general conversation across class lines". So, social classes are forced to "speak to themselves in a dialect... inaccessible to outsiders". The media establishment is more committed to "a misguided ideal of objectivity" than to context and continuity, which underlie any meaningful public discourse.

The spiritual crisis was another matter altogether. This was simply the result of over-secularization. The secular worldview is devoid of doubts and insecurities, explained Lasch. Thus, single-handedly, he eliminated modern science, which is driven by constant doubts, insecurities and questioning and by an utter lack of respect for authority, transcendental as it may be. With amazing gall, Lasch says that it was religion which provided a home for spiritual uncertainties!!!

Religion - writes Lasch - was a source of higher meaning, a repository of practical moral wisdom. Minor matters such as the suspension of curiosity, doubt and disbelief entailed by religious practice and the blood-saturated history of all religions - these are not mentioned. Why spoil a good argument?

The new elites disdain religion and are hostile to it:

"The culture of criticism is understood to rule out religious commitments... (religion) was something useful for weddings and funerals but otherwise dispensable."

Without the benefit of a higher ethic provided by religion (for which the price of suppression of free thought is paid - SV) - the knowledge elites resort to cynicism and revert to irreverence.

"The collapse of religion, its replacement by the remorselessly critical sensibility exemplified by psychoanalysis and the degeneration of the 'analytic attitude' into an all out assault on ideals of every kind have left our culture in a sorry state."

Lasch was a fanatic religious man. He would have rejected this title with vehemence. But he was the worst type: unable to commit himself to the practice while advocating its employment by others. If you asked him why was religion good, he would have waxed on concerning its good RESULTS. He said nothing about the inherent nature of religion, its tenets, its view of Mankind's destiny, or anything else of substance. Lasch was a social engineer of the derided Marxist type: if it works, if it molds the masses, if it keeps them "in limits", subservient - use it. Religion worked wonders in this respect. But Lasch himself was above his own laws - he even made it a point not to write God with a capital "G", an act of outstanding "courage". Schiller wrote about the "disenchantment of the world", the disillusionment which accompanies secularism - a real sign of true courage, according to Nietzsche. Religion is a powerful weapon in the arsenal of those who want to make people feel good about themselves, their lives and the world, in general. Not so Lasch:

"...the spiritual discipline against self-righteousness is the very essence of religion... (anyone with) a proper understanding of religion... (would not regard it as) a source of intellectual and emotional security (but as) ...a challenge to complacency and pride."

There is no hope or consolation even in religion. It is good only for the purposes of social engineering.

The New Radicalism in America

In this particular respect, Lasch has undergone a major transformation. In "The New Radicalism in America" (1965), he decried religion as a source of obfuscation.

"The religious roots of the progressive doctrine" - he wrote - were the source of "its main weakness". These roots fostered an anti-intellectual willingness to use education "as a means of social control" rather than as a basis for enlightenment. The solution was to blend Marxism and the analytic method of Psychoanalysis (very much as Herbert Marcuse has done - q.v. "Eros and Civilization" and "One Dimensional Man").

In an earlier work ("American Liberals and the Russian Revolution", 1962) he criticized liberalism for seeking "painless progress towards the celestial city of consumerism". He questioned the assumption that "men and women wish only to enjoy life with minimum effort". The liberal illusions about the Revolution were based on a theological misconception. Communism remained irresistible for "as long as they clung to the dream of an earthly paradise from which doubt was forever banished".

In 1973, a mere decade later, the tone is different ("The World of Nations", 1973). The assimilation of the Mormons, he says, was "achieved by sacrificing whatever features of their doctrine or ritual were demanding or difficult... (like) the conception of a secular community organized in accordance with religious principles".

The wheel turned a full cycle in 1991 ("The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics"). The petite bourgeois at least are "unlikely to mistake the promised land of progress for the true and only heaven".

In "Heaven in a Heartless world" (1977) Lasch criticized the "substitution of medical and psychiatric authority for the authority of parents, priests and lawgivers". The Progressives, he complained, identify social control with freedom. It is the traditional family - not the socialist revolution - which provides the best hope to arrest "new forms of domination". There is latent strength in the family and in its "old fashioned middle class morality". Thus, the decline of the family institution meant the decline of romantic love (!?) and of "transcendent ideas in general", a typical Laschian leap of logic.

Even art and religion ("The Culture of Narcissism", 1979), "historically the great emancipators from the prison of the Self... even sex... (lost) the power to provide an imaginative release".

It was Schopenhauer who wrote that art is a liberating force, delivering us from our miserable, decrepit, dilapidated Selves and transforming our conditions of existence. Lasch - forever a melancholy - adopted this view enthusiastically. He supported the suicidal pessimism of Schopenhauer. But he was also wrong. Never before was there an art form more liberating than the cinema, THE art of illusion. The Internet introduced a transcendental dimension into the lives of all its users. Why is it that transcendental entities must be white-bearded, paternal and authoritarian? What is less transcendental in the Global Village, in the Information Highway or, for that matter, in Steven Spielberg?

The Left, thundered Lasch, had "chosen the wrong side in the cultural warfare between 'Middle America' and the educated or half educated classes, which have absorbed avant-garde ideas only to put them at the service of consumer capitalism".

In "The Minimal Self" (1984) the insights of traditional religion remained vital as opposed to the waning moral and intellectual authority of Marx, Freud and the like. The meaningfulness of mere survival is questioned: "Self affirmation remains a possibility precisely to the degree that an older conception of personality, rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions, has persisted alongside a behavioral or therapeutic conception". "Democratic Renewal" will be made possible through this mode of self- affirmation. The world was rendered meaningless by experiences such as Auschwitz, a "survival ethic" was the unwelcome result. But, to Lasch, Auschwitz offered "the need for a renewal of religious faith... for collective commitment to decent social conditions... (the survivors) found strength in the revealed word of an absolute, objective and omnipotent creator... not in personal 'values' meaningful only to themselves". One can't help being fascinated by the total disregard for facts displayed by Lasch, flying in the face of logotherapy and the writings of Victor Frankel, the Auschwitz survivor.

"In the history of civilization... vindictive gods give way to gods who show mercy as well and uphold the morality of loving your enemy. Such a morality has never achieved anything like general popularity, but it lives on, even in our own, enlightened age, as a reminder both of our fallen state and of our surprising capacity

for gratitude, remorse and forgiveness by means of which we now and then transcend it."

He goes on to criticize the kind of "progress" whose culmination is a "vision of men and women released from outward constraints". Endorsing the legacies of Jonathan Edwards, Orestes Brownson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Carlyle, William James, Reinhold Niebuhr and, above all, Martin Luther King, he postulated an alternative tradition, "The Heroic Conception of Life" (an admixture of Brownson's Catholic Radicalism and early republican lore): "...a suspicion that life was not worth living unless it was lived with ardour, energy and devotion".

A truly democratic society will incorporate diversity and a shared commitment to it - but not as a goal unto itself. Rather as means to a "demanding, morally elevating standard of conduct". In sum: "Political pressure for a more equitable distribution of wealth can come only from movements fired with religious purpose and a lofty conception of life". The alternative, progressive optimism, cannot withstand adversity: "The disposition properly described as hope, trust or wonder... three names for the same state of heart and mind - asserts the goodness of life in the face of its limits. It cannot be deflated by adversity". This disposition is brought about by religious ideas (which the Progressives discarded):

"The power and majesty of the sovereign creator of life, the inescapability of evil in the form of natural limits on human freedom, the sinfulness of man's rebellion against those limits; the moral value of work which once signifies man's submission to necessity and enables him to transcend it..."

Martin Luther King was a great man because "(He) also spoke the language of his own people (in addition to addressing the whole nation - SV), which incorporated their experience of hardship and exploitation, yet affirmed the rightness of a world full of unmerited hardship... (he drew strength from) a popular religious tradition whose mixture of hope and fatalism was quite alien to liberalism".

Lasch said that this was the First deadly Sin of the civil rights movement. It insisted that racial issues be tackled "with arguments drawn from modern sociology and from the scientific refutation of social porejudice" - and not on moral (read: religious) grounds.

So, what is left to provide us with guidance? Opinion polls. Lasch failed to explain to us why he demonized this particular phenomenon. Polls are mirrors and the conduct of polls is an indication that the public (whose opinion is polled) is trying to get to know itself better. Polls are an attempt at quantified, statistical self-awareness (nor are they a modern phenomenon). Lasch should have been happy: at last proof that Americans adopted his views and decided to know themselves. To have criticized this particular instrument of "know thyself" implied that Lasch believed that he had privileged access to more information of superior quality or that he believed that his observations tower over the opinions of thousands of respondents and carry more weight. A trained observer would never have succumbed to such vanity. There is a fine line between vanity and oppression, fanaticism and the grief that is inflicted upon those that are subjected to it.

Conclusion

This is Lasch's greatest error: there is an abyss between narcissism and self love, being interested in oneself and being obsessively preoccupied with oneself. Lasch confuses the two. The price of progress is growing self-awareness and with it growing pains and the pains of growing up. It is not a loss of meaning and hope - it is just that pain has a tendency to push everything to the background. Those are constructive pains, signs of adjustment and adaptation, of evolution. America has no inflated, megalomaniac, grandiose ego. It never built an overseas empire, it is made of dozens of ethnic immigrant groups, it strives to learn, to emulate. Americans do not lack empathy - they are the foremost nation of volunteers and also professes the biggest number of (tax deductible) donation makers. Americans are not exploitative - they are hard workers, fair players, Adam Smith-ian egoists. They believe in Live and Let Live. They are individualists and they believe that the individual is the source of all authority and the universal yardstick and benchmark. This is a positive philosophy. Granted, it led to inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth. But then other ideologies had much worse outcomes. Luckily, they were defeated by the human spirit, the best manifestation of which is still democratic capitalism.

The clinical term "Narcissism" was abused by Lasch in his books. It joined other words mistreated by this social preacher. The respect that this man gained in his lifetime (as a social scientist and historian of culture) makes one wonder whether he was right in criticizing the shallowness and lack of intellectual rigor of American society and of its elites.

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